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## LORENZO DOW<sup>1</sup>

This is the record of a remarkable and eccentric white man who devoted himself to a life of singular labor and self-denial. In any consideration of the South one could not avoid giving at least passing notice to Lorenzo Dow as the foremost itinerant preacher of his time, as the first Protestant who expounded the gospel in Alabama and Mississippi, and as a reformer who, at the very moment when cotton was beginning to be supreme, presumed to tell the South that slavery was wrong.

He arrests attention—this gaunt, restless preacher. With his long hair, his flowing beard, his harsh voice, and his wild gesticulation, he was so rude and unkempt as to startle all conservative hearers. Said one of his opponents: "His manners (are) clownish in the extreme; his habit and appearance more filthy than a savage Indian, his public discourses a mere rhapsody, the substance often an insult upon the gospel." Said another as to his preaching in Richmond: "Mr. Dow's clownish manners, his heterodox and schismatic proceedings, and his reflections against the Methodist Episcopal Church, in a late production of his on church government, are impositions on common sense, and furnish the principal reasons why he will be discountenanced by the Methodists."

But he was made in the mould of heroes. In his lifetime

<sup>1</sup> Very little has been written about Lorenzo Dow. There is an article by Emily S. Gilman in the *New England Magazine*, Vol. 20, p. 411 (June, 1899), and also one by J. H. Kennedy in the *Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 7, p. 162. The present paper is based mainly upon the following works: (1) "Biography and Miscellany," published by Lorenzo Dow, Norwich, Conn., 1834; (2) "History of Cosmopolite;" or "The Four Volumes of Lorenzo Dow's Journal concentrated in one, containing his Experience and Travels," Wheeling, 1848; (3) "The Dealings of God, Man, and the Devil; as exemplified in the Life, Experience, and Travels of Lorenzo Dow," 2 vols. in one. With an Introductory Essay by the Rev. John Dowling, D.D., of New York. Cincinnati, 1858.

he traveled not less than two hundred thousand miles, preaching to more people than any other man of his time. He went from New England to the extremities of the Union in the West again and again. Several times he went to Canada, once to the West Indies, and three times to England, everywhere drawing great crowds about him. Friend of the oppressed, he knew no path but that of duty. Evangel to the pioneer, he again and again left the haunts of men to seek the western wilderness. Conversant with the Scriptures, intolerant of wrong, witty and brilliant, he assembled his hearers by the thousands. What can account for so unusual a character? What were the motives that prompted this man to so extraordinary and laborious a life?

Lorenzo Dow was born October 16, 1777, in Coventry, Tolland County, Connecticut. When not yet four years old, he tells us, one day while at play he "suddenly fell into a muse about God and those places called heaven and hell." Once he killed a bird and was horrified for days at the act. Later he won a lottery prize of nine shillings and experienced untold remorse. An illness at the age of twelve gave him the shortness of breath from which he suffered more and more throughout his life. About this time he dreamed that the Prophet Nathan came to him and told him that he would live only until he was two-and-twenty. When thirteen he had another dream, this time of an old man, John Wesley, who showed to him the beauties of heaven and held out the promise that he would win if he was faithful to the end. A few years afterwards came to the town Hope Hull, preaching "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"; and Lorenzo said: "I thought he told me all that ever I did." The next day the future evangelist was converted.

But he was to be no ordinary Christian, this Lorenzo. Not satisfied with his early baptism, he had the ceremony repeated, and with twelve others formed a society for mutual watch and helpfulness. At the age of eighteen he had still another dream, this time seeing a brittle thread in the air suspended by a voice saying, "Woe unto you if you

preach not the gospel." Then Wesley himself appeared again to him in a dream and warned him to set out at once upon his mission.

The young candidate applied to the Connecticut Conference of the Methodist Church. He met with a reception that would have daunted any man less courageous. He best tells the story himself: "My brethren sent me home. Warren and Greenwich circuits, in Rhode Island, were the first of my career. I obeyed, but with a sorrowful heart. Went out a second time to New Hampshire, but sent home again; I obeyed. Afterwards went to Conference by direction—who rejected me, and sent me home again; and again I obeyed. Was taken out by P. W. on to Orange circuit, but in 1797 was sent home again: so in obedience to man I went home a fourth time."

As a matter of fact there was much in the argument of the church against Lorenzo Dow at this time. The young preacher was not only ungraceful and ungracious in manner, but he had severe limitations in education and frequently assumed toward his elders an air needlessly arrogant and contemptuous. On the other hand he must reasonably have been offended by the advice so frequently given him in gratuitous and patronizing fashion. Soon after the last rebuff just recorded, however, he says, on going out on the Granville circuit, "The Lord gave me souls for my hire." Again making application to the Conference, he was admitted on trial for the first time in 1798 and sent to Canada to break fresh ground. He was not satisfied with the unpromising field and wrote, "My mind was drawn to the water, and Ireland was on my mind." His great desire was to preach the gospel to the Roman Catholics beyond the sea. Accordingly, on his twenty-second birthday, acting solely on his own resources, the venturesome evangelist embarked at Montreal for Dublin. Here he had printed three thousand handbills to warn the people of the wrath to come. He attracted some attention, but soon caught the smallpox and was forced to return home. Back in America, he communicated to the Conference his desire to "travel

the country at large." The church, not at all impressed in his favor by his going to Ireland on his own accord, would do nothing more than admit him to his old status of being on trial, with appointment to the Dutchess, Columbia, and Litchfield circuits. Depressed, Dow gave up the work, and, desiring a warmer climate, he turned his face toward the South. From this time forth, while he constantly exhibited a willingness to meet the church half way, he consistently acted with all possible independence, and the church as resolutely set its face against him.

Dow landed in Savannah in January, 1802. This was his first visit to the region that was to mean so much to him and in whose history he himself was to play so interesting a rôle. He walked on foot for hundreds of miles in Georgia and South Carolina, everywhere preaching the gospel to all classes alike. Returning to the North, he found that once more he could not come to terms with his conference. He went back to the South, going now by land for the first time. He went as far as Mississippi, then the wild south-western frontier, and penetrated far into the country of Indians and wolves. Returning in 1804, he became one of the first evangelists to cultivate the camp-meeting as an institution in central Virginia. Then he threw down the gauntlet to established Methodism, daring to speak in Baltimore while the General Conference of the church was in session there. The church replied at once, the New York Conference passing a law definitely commanding its churches to shut their doors against him.

Notwithstanding this opposition Dow continued to work with his usual zeal. About 1804 he was very busy, speaking at from five hundred to eight hundred meetings a year. In the year 1805, in spite of the inconveniences of those days, he traveled ten thousand miles. Then he made ready to go again to Europe. Everything possible was done by the regular church to embarrass him on this second visit, and when he arrived in England he found the air far from cordial. He did succeed in introducing his camp-meetings into the country, however; and although the Methodist

Conference registered the opinion that such meetings were "highly improper in England," Dow prolonged his stay and planted seed which, as we shall see, was later to bear abundant fruit. Returning to America, the evangelist set out upon one of the most memorable periods of his life, journeying from New England to Florida in 1807, from Mississippi to New England and through the West in 1808, through Louisiana in 1809, through Georgia and North Carolina and back to New England in 1810, spending 1811 for the most part in New England, working southward to Virginia in 1812, and spending 1813 and 1814 in the Middle and Northern states, where the public mind was "darkened more and more against him." More than once he was forced to engage in controversy. Typical was the judgment of the Baltimore Conference in 1809, when, in a matter of difference between Dow and one Mr. S., without Dow's having been seen, opinion was given to the effect that Mr. S. "had given satisfaction" to the conference. Some remarks of Dow's on "Church Government" were seized upon as the excuse for the treatment generally accorded him by the church. In spite of much hostile opinion, however, Dow seems always to have found firm friends in the State of North Carolina. In 1818 a paper in Raleigh spoke of him as follows: "However his independent way of thinking, and his unsparing candor of language may have offended others, he has always been treated here with the respect due to his disinterested exertions, and the strong powers of mind which his sermons constantly exhibit."<sup>2</sup>

His hold upon the masses was remarkable. No preacher so well as he understood the heart of the pioneer. In a day when the "jerks," and falling and rolling on the ground, and dancing still accompanied religious emotion, he still knew how to give to his hearers, whether bond or free, the wholesome bread of life. Frequently he inspired an awe that was almost superstitious and made numerous converts. Sometimes he would make appointments a year beforehand and suddenly appear before a waiting congregation like an

<sup>2</sup> "Dealings," II, 169.

apparition. At Montville, Connecticut, a thief had stolen an axe. In the course of a sermon Dow said that the guilty man was in the congregation and had a feather on his nose. At once the right man was detected by his trying to brush away the feather. On another occasion Dow denounced a rich man who had recently died. He was tried for slander and imprisoned in the county jail. As soon as he was released he announced that he would preach about "another rich man." Going into the pulpit at the appointed time, he began to read: "And there was another rich man who died and—." Here he stopped and after a breathless pause he said, "Brethren, I shall not mention the place this rich man went to, for fear he has some relatives in this congregation who will sue me." The effect was irresistible; but Dow heightened it by taking another text, preaching a most dignified sermon, and not again referring to the text on which he had started.

Dow went again to England in 1818. He was not well received by the Calvinists or the Methodists, and, of course, not by the Episcopalians; but he found that his camp-meeting idea had begun twelve years before a new religious sect, that of the Primitive Methodists, commonly known as "ranters." The society in 1818 was several thousand strong, and Dow visited between thirty and forty of its chapels. Returning home, he resumed his itineraries, going in 1827 as far west as Missouri. In thinking of this man's work in the West we must keep constantly in mind, of course, the great difference made by a hundred years. In Charleston in 1821 he was arrested for "an alleged libel against the peace and dignity of the State of South Carolina." His wife went north, as it was not known but that he might be detained a long time; but he was released on payment of a fine of one dollar. In Troy also he was once arrested on a false pretense. At length, however, he rejoiced to see his enemies defeated. In 1827 he wrote: "Those who instigated the trouble for me at Charleston, South Carolina, or contributed thereto, were all cut off within the space of three years, except Robert Y. Hayne,

who was then the Attorney-General for the state, and is now the Governor for the *nullifiers*.”<sup>3</sup>


The year 1833 Dow spent in visiting many places in New York, and in this year he made the following entry in his Journal: “I am now in my fifty-sixth year in the journey of life; and enjoy better health than when but 30 or 35 years old, with the exception of the callous in my breast, which at times gives me great pain. . . . The dealings of God to me-ward, have been good. I have seen his delivering hand, and felt the inward support of his grace, by faith and hope, which kept my head from sinking when the billows of affliction seemed to encompass me around. . . . And should those hints exemplified in the experience of Cosmopolite be beneficial to any one, give God the glory. Amen and Amen! Farewell!” He died the following year in Georgetown, District of Columbia, and rests under a simple slab in Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington.

There is only one word to describe the writings of Lorenzo Dow—Miscellanies. Anything whatsoever that came to the evangelist's mind was set down, not always with good form, though frequently with witty and forceful expression. Here are “Hints to the Public, or Thoughts on the Fulfilment of Prophecy in 1811”; “A Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem,” with a good deal of sophomoric discussion of natural and moral philosophy; “A Dialogue between the Curious and the Singular,” with some discussion of religious societies and theological principles; “The Chain of Lorenzo,” an argument on the eternal sonship of Christ; “Omnifarious Law Exemplified: How to Curse and Swear, Lie, Cheat and Kill according to Law,” “Reflections on the Important Subject of Matrimony,” and much more of the same sort. “Strictures on Church Government” has already been referred to as bringing upon Dow the wrath of the Methodist Church. The general thesis of this publication, regarded at the time as so sensational, is that the Methodist mode of church government is the most arbitrary

<sup>3</sup> “Dealings,” I, 178.



and despotic of any in America, with the possible exception of that of the Shakers.

"A Cry from the Wilderness—intended as a Timely and Solemn Warning to the People of the United States" is in every way one of Dow's most characteristic works. At this distance, when slavery and the Civil War are viewed in the perspective, the mystic words of the oracle impress us as almost uncanny: "In the rest of the southern states, the influence of these Foreigners will be known and felt in its time, and the seeds from the HORY ALLIANCE and the DE-CAPIGANDI, who have a hand in those grades of GENERALS, from the INQUISITOR to the Vicar General and down. . . .  The STRUGGLE will be DREADFUL! the CUP will be BITTER! and when the agony is over, those who survive may see better days! FAREWELL!" <sup>4</sup>

A radical preacher of the Gospel, he could not but be moved with compassion on observing the condition of the Negroes in the South during these years. When denied admission to white churches because of his apparent fanaticism he often found it pleasant to move among the blacks. Arriving in Savannah, one day, he was accosted by a Negro, who, seeing that he had no place to stop, inquired as to whether he would accept the hospitality of a black home. He embraced this opportunity and found the people by whom he was entertained "as decent as two thirds of the citizens of Savannah." <sup>5</sup> When on another occasion in Savannah he learned that Andrew Bryan, the Negro minister of the city, had, because of his preaching, been whipped unmercifully and imprisoned, Dow preached to the congregation himself. <sup>6</sup> He moved among Negroes, lived with them socially, distributed tracts among them, preached to them the Word, counted them with pride among his converts and treasured in his memory his experiences among them. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Dealings," II, 148.

<sup>5</sup> "Perambulations of Cosmopolite, or Travels and Labors in Europe and America," 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

As a result this liberal-minded man was naturally opposed to slavery. He was as outspoken a champion of freedom as lived in America in his day. "Slavery in the South," said he, "is an evil that calls for national reform and repentance." He thought that this "national scourge in this world" might "be antidoted before the storm" gathered and burst.<sup>8</sup> "As all men are created equal and independent by God of Nature," contended he, "Slavery must have Moral Evil for its foundation, seeing it violates the Law of Nature, as established by its author." "Ambition and avarice on the one hand," thought he, "and social dependence upon the other, affords the former an opportunity of being served at the expense of the latter and this unnatural state of things hath been exemplified in all countries, and all ages of the world from time immemorial." He further said, "Pride and vain glory on the one side, and degradation and oppression on the other creates on the one hand a spirit of contempt, and on the other a spirit of hatred and revenge, preparing them to be dissolute: and qualifying them for every base and malicious work!" He believed that "the mind of man is ever aspiring for a more exalted station; the consequence is the better slaves used the more saucy and impertinent they become: of course the practice must be wholly abolished or the slaves must be governed with absolute sway." He had discovered that "the exercise of an absolute sway over others begets an unnatural hardness which as it becomes imperious contaminates the mind of the governor; while the governed becomes factious and stupefied like brute beasts, which are kept under by a continual dread and hence whenever the subject is investigated, the evils of despotism presents to view in all their odious forms."<sup>9</sup>

His attack on slavery, however, was neither so general nor universal as would be expected of such a radical. He saw that "there is a distinction admissible in some cases, be-

<sup>8</sup> Biography and Miscellany, 30.

<sup>9</sup> "A Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem or the Road to Peace and True Happiness," 71.

tween Slavery itself and the spirit of slavery." "A man may possess slaves by inheritance or some other way; and may not have it in his power either to liberate them or to make better their circumstances, being trammelled by the Laws and circumstances of the country,—yet whilst he feels a sincere wish to do them all the justice he can." He remarked too that "we have no account of Jesus Christ saying one word about emancipation. Onesimus ran away from Philemon to Rome; whence finding Paul, whom he had seen at his master's, he experienced religion, and was sent back by the apostle with a letter—but not a word about setting him free." <sup>10</sup>

Contrasting then the unhappy state with that of the past, he said, "The first and primitive Christians had all things common, not from commandment but from spirit by which they were influenced day by day; so when the time of restitution takes place, which will be long before the consummation of all things, then the Law of Nature, from Moral principles will be practiced and the world will be as one concentrated Family." "The openings to Providence preparatory to that day should be attended to, from principles of duty—lest judgments should perform what offered mercy if not rejected may be ready to accomplish. To feed and clothe another is both the interest and duty of all Masters—and the sixth chapter of Ephesians is an excellent tract on the subject to all who wish for advice, both as masters and servants." <sup>11</sup>

It was likewise in keeping with Dow's fearlessness to denounce the efforts to discriminate against Negroes in the early Churches. He questioned the far-reaching authority of Bishop Coke, Asbury, and McKendree, and accused Asbury of being jealous of the rising power of Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Church.<sup>12</sup> He refers at considerable length to the incident in a Philadelphia church which ultimately made Absalom Jones a rector and Richard

<sup>10</sup> "A Journey from Babylon and Jerusalem," 71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> "History of Cosmopolite," 544-546.

Allen a bishop: "The colored people were considered by some persons as being in the way. They were resolved to have them removed, and placed around the walls, corners, etc.; which to execute, the above expelled and restored man, at prayer time, did attempt to pull Absolom Jones from his knees, which procedure, with its concomitants, gave rise to the building of an African meeting house, the first ever built in these middle or northern states."

Here at least was a man with a mission—that mission to carry the gospel of Christ to the uttermost parts of the earth. He knew no standard but that of duty; he heeded no command but that of his own soul. Rude, and sharp of speech he was, and only half-educated; but he was made of the stuff of heroes; and neither hunger, nor cold, nor powers, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, could daunt him in his task. After the lapse of a hundred years he looms larger, not smaller, in the history of our Southland; and as of old we seem to hear again "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY